



Claire Harris

Biography

In 1937, Claire Harris was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, where her father was the Inspector of Schools and her mother was a teacher. Harris was the second of six children, and was home-schooled until the age of seven. Then she attended St. Joseph's Convent school for what she called a "classical British Catholic education" (Williams 42).

In 1961, Harris received her B.A. Honors in English from University College Dublin, and briefly worked at her former school before leaving to pursue her post-graduate degree. She received her Teacher's Diploma in Jamaica (University of West Indies) in 1963, and once again returned to Trinidad to teach at her former school. From 1963 to 1966, she taught at the convent and also at Catholic Women's Teachers Training College.

At that point in 1966 Harris immigrated to Calgary, Canada, and began to teach English at the Separate Schools where she remained until 1994. In an interview in 1999, Harris explained, "Canada offered me space to write without the self-censorship necessary in a small society. Here I was anonymous, I could afford to fail" (Williams 43). In 1975, Harris earned her Diploma in Mass Media and Communications in Nigeria (University of Lagos), and from 1976 to 1979 she worked with "Poetry Goes Public." From 1981 to 1989, Harris worked as a poetry editor for *Dandelion*, and quickly became a strong figure in the Canadian literature arena, and learned a great deal about the publishing world. Also, in 1983, she helped found the magazine *blue buffalo* which in her words "was to get local writers that important first publication credit" (Williams 43). Harris won the Writer's Guild of Alberta Award in 1984 for *Translation into Fiction*, and also won the Commonwealth Award for Poetry for the Americas Region, *Fables from the Women's Quarters* that same year. In 1987, she won the Writer's Guild of Alberta Award for *Traveling to Find a Remedy* and in 1992 *Drawing Down A Daughter* was nominated for a Governor General's Award.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1937
- * Grew up in Trinidad and immigrated to Canada
- * First published work was *Fables from the Women's Quarters*

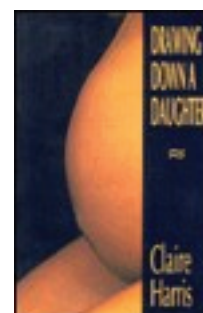
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Literature Review

A common point unites scholarly and popular critics on Harris: that Harris has a gift of language and voice and the ability to use those gifts to put a spotlight on social consciousness. As Sylvia Adams explains, *Dipped In Shadow*, a collection of five long poems, “rages at the festering sores of human crisis and tragedy, in particular at their effect on women in a society that is paternalistic and frequently brutal.” In that way, Harris does not always give the reader what they want to hear. According to Lynette Hunter, she “is one of the most eloquently precise writers emerging from the modernist tradition.” Topics in her poetry range from mental health, to domestic abuse, to maternal relationships, to incest and war. Claire Harris’ gift of language and voice is quite prominent in her work. In *She*, a text that centers on a woman with several distinct personalities, Harris displays her ability to make the reader feel as if there are different languages, voices, and personalities all within one person (Stevenson). Her unique presentation is also evident in *Drawing Down A Daughter*. Susan Rudy explains in *Essays On Canadian Writing* that the text “presents us with a liminal autobiographical space that teases us with both the politicized consciousness of Harris and the presence and absence of details of her life in the text” (78). When reading Harris, the wording demands attention, and the poetry’s voices are so urgent, a reader cannot help but pay attention (Morley, Adams).



Because Claire Harris’ work is honest — at times brutally honest — the critics point out that, as in life, there is not always a solution or a simple answer to any trial or tribulation in her work. In Harris’ intricately complex book of poetry, as critic Paul Vermeesch points out, she presents no villains in the story; there are no clear lines that separate good and evil. Because of that, there is no solution to the struggle in the story — no traditionally accepted “happy ending.” Harris’ honesty and unwillingness to compromise render a portrait in *She* of a shattered, fragile life (Vermeesch). Similarly, Harris’ analysis of a Canadian policeman who strip-searched and arrested a 15-year-old black girl for jaywalking challenges society, particularly Canadian society, to address problems of racism and sexism.





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Literature review continued

Harris explores these situations in her poem, “Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case.” As a general consensus, not only is the poetry of Claire Harris seen as exceptionally well-written and honest, but her subject matter is regarded as conscious and daring as well. A comment made by Sylvia Adams regarding *Dipped in Shadow* applies well to other works by Harris: “No easy solution, only an endless cycle of pain with occasional drawing empathy. This is a book you can’t escape. It will sink its teeth into any part of you that begs to remain unmoved” (Adams).

Critics may have formed positive opinions about Claire Harris’ work, yet these responses are professional responses made by people with eyes and minds trained on the reading of poetry. To the less trained, more amateur readers, like us, the response to Claire Harris’ work was often more emotional. As readers in a class on Women Writers focusing mainly on Caribbean-North American writers, we initially noted her use of words on the page, her word choices, and her use of sound, rhyme, and rhythm. We noted especially the shapes and symbols that her words often form. But what struck us most was the level of intensity that her poems held. With their stunning representations, images, and moments, her descriptions often caused an emotional response in us. In her poem “Woman Womb Prisoned” from *Dipped in Shadow* Harris gives a description of a teenage girl giving birth to a baby in the family bathroom. She writes, “she falls asleep / refusing all / her legs open it lies between / mottled nasty face down / squirming on cold enamel / breathing / ...breathing.” As we were reading this out loud in class I immediately placed my hand protectively over my stomach. You could hear a few women gasp, and a couple even covered their mouths. We then talked about how sad the passage was, and how disgusting, and how vivid.



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We then discussed the idea that Harris' writing was translucent, that it lets you see what she is writing about, but at the same time allows a separation between the actual intended meaning of the words and what the reader can personally relate to. We compared this technique to a light veil hanging between the poem and us, the readers. Harris achieved this veil with recognizable, identifiable, often clear images—sometimes shocking images that caused an immediate reaction inside of us. This veil allowed us to apply Harris' images and ideas to our own lives. The passage above, from *Dipped in Shadow*, is a good representation of this. We could see the baby lying face down in the bottom of the tub, and we could picture the bloody mess, and her legs lying limply on each side. But it was the women who were mothers who got the most noticeably upset during the reading. I later read the passage to a sensitive male friend of mine. He mentioned that although the image was vivid, it wasn't as emotionally striking to him as it had been to the women who had read or heard it. This veil affected how we each individually related emotionally to the poem, but then gave us reason for discussion because each of our perceptions as to what Harris was trying to say or portray differed. We thought this technique was extremely powerful, and often the reactions the poems forced us to face were more memorable than the specific words or poems that we had read.

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